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# TORSTEN HUSEN

(1916-)

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Torsten Husén is eminent in the world of education. In 1993 he is typically mentioned together with such names as Ralph Tyler of the United States of America and C.E. Beeby of New Zealand when conversation centres on the greatest living educators. Who is he? How has his career developed? What are his contributions to education?

## **Towards a *Weltanschauung***

Torsten Husén was born on 1 March 1916 in Lund, Sweden. His mother, Betty Prawitz, the daughter of a primary school-teacher, had been trained as a telegraphist. She had received 500 days of half-time primary schooling which was the equivalent of about six years of education. This arrangement was typical in rural areas at that time.

Torsten Husén's father was the manager of a sawmill which was subsequently burned down. In 1918, his father opened up his own timber agency.

When Husén was about 5 years old he was sent on holiday to his uncle's home in Stockholm. This uncle was the headmaster of a special education school for the deaf and dumb. The school and his uncle's home were situated in a very large park called Djurgorden. On one of my walks through this park with Husén, I recall him telling me of his visit to his uncle's and how, at the time, he thought that Stockholm consisted of just a big park.

At the age of 6—one year ahead of the official age for school entry in Sweden—he started primary school. He had learned to use the typewriter and told the teacher that he did not need to learn to write by longhand! He then proceeded to the municipal middle school in Alvesta to which he commuted daily for four years before entering the gymnasium in Växjö where he enrolled in the mathematics/natural sciences stream.

As was required at that time, he had to learn three foreign languages, beginning with German, then English, and finally French. These languages were mandatory for those who planned to enter the university. But in the middle school he disliked the teacher of French and therefore skipped that language for two years. This resulted in his having to spend a summer taking private lessons in French before being admitted to the gymnasium. After six years of learning German and one summer as an exchange student in Germany, he became fluent in that language and accompanied his father on business trips to Germany where he served as his interpreter.

He had studied English in school for almost as many years as German but did not have any opportunity of practising it in conversation until he first went to the United Kingdom in 1946. At university nearly all of the assigned reading was in one or the other of the three languages mentioned. At that time much of the assigned reading in the social sciences was in English, this field being dominated by American scholars. As can be seen from his bibliography, he later wrote several of his books and most of his articles in English—his third language.

As opposed to many eminent public figures who reminisce about the influence of a particular teacher on their formation, there is little to be found in Husén's writings about the influence of any one person on him, with the exception of the history and mother-tongue teacher at the gymnasium—a Mr. Rundquist. His influence can be seen in the subjects Husén selected to study at the university.

There are several behavioural traits which Torsten Husén possesses which, it is tempting to think, were part and parcel of his personality before he entered the university. The first was *nulla dies sine linea*—no day shall pass without some lines being written. The second was 'nothing is impossible', in the sense of not being deterred by what appear to be high bureaucratic or administrative hurdles. The third was his ability to concentrate even for short periods of time on a single task. (I once spent five days at an international meeting that Husén was chairing. The work schedule was tough. Each day began with a breakfast meeting and rarely ended before 11 p.m. At some juncture the possibility arose of antagonistic views—and personalities—reaching the point where a joint international venture was put in jeopardy. The strain on Husén as chairman was enormous. And yet, on each of those five days, he sat down for thirty minutes—typically between 6:30 and 7:00 p.m.—and wrote the draft of two academic articles the content of which had nothing to do with the meeting.)

Another trait is his voracious reading. He had clearly read very, very widely and was, in the positive sense of the word, a polyhistor.

In 1935 at the age of 19, after military service, he entered the University of Lund. He has often made the point that he regarded the university (and would still like all students to have a similar perception) as a *smörgasbord* from which to make a choice in order to satisfy one's intellectual curiosity and taste. He studied mathematics for his first academic credits, then switched to literature and history, and finally to a subject then known as psychology and education.

His first publication appeared in 1940 in a literary journal and dealt with the influence of French psychiatry and clinical psychology on Strindberg in the 1880s. By the end of 1941 one book and ten articles were in print, all on the subject of military psychology, which he was dealing with during his service in the Army Staff offices in Stockholm.

He undertook his graduate studies in psychology, but it could just as well have been in history or in literature. In the School of Psychology and Education he came under the tutelage of Professor John Landquist, who had become well known for his seminars at the University of Lund in the 1930s and 1940s. His inspired teaching attracted several graduate students who later became professors in that field in Sweden.

In 1938 and 1939 Husén attended summer courses at the University of Marburg, Germany, where he listened to lectures by Professor Ernst Kretschmer. In Marburg he met Ingrid, who was attending a course in German. They married in 1940. They would not return to Germany until 1952 when they were invited to Frankfurt/Main with their three children.

In the meantime, in 1938-39, he became involved in a major longitudinal study to carry out psychological tests on all 10-year-olds who had been born in the city of Malmö in 1928, a project aimed at elucidating the social influences of the intelligence quotient (IQ). This was his introduction to tests and measurements, as well as differential psychology.

His thesis for his first advanced degree (Licentiate) in 1941 was on eidetic imagery, its origin and phenomenology. His doctoral dissertation, a 500-page book entitled 'Adolescence', dealt with the psychology of the age-span 16 to 20 years and was based on an analysis of the responses to questionnaires from a sample of 1,000 young persons applying for enlistment into the Swedish army. Each aspect of adolescence covered in the questionnaire was accompanied by the relevant literature from Austrian, German and even French sources. As will be seen later, it was from his work with the military that he used data collected for one purpose to serve quite a different end. The 'disputation', i.e. the defence of the thesis, lasted more than six hours and was used by competing factions within the university to further their own favourites for promotion. It

should be pointed out that, at that time, the oral defense of a doctoral thesis in Sweden was a daunting experience even in the best of conditions. The candidate had to be dressed in tails and white tie, as had the three opponents. The ‘oral’ was open to all so that there might be hundreds of persons in the auditorium. Any member of the public, referred to as opponents *extra ordinem*, could ask questions. In Torsten Husén’s case there were four or five of them, representing a faction wanting to use the occasion to attack Landquist indirectly. Landquist was due to retire two years later and his chair had to be filled, preferably not by Husén but by a favourite son of some other faculty member. The knives were out!

By the age of 28 years he was a person skilled in foreign languages, versed in literacy criticism, in historical methods, and who had studied psychology in the tradition of Wundt and his pupil Ernst Meumann, as well as philosophy in the tradition of the Vienna Circle. His methodological training in psychology had taken place in experiments on memory, perception and psychophysics. By the end of 1944, he had published three books and some sixty articles. Above all, he was a person with a very broad view of academic life and an insatiable curiosity—a curiosity that was of an intellectual nature and not one that was politically motivated. He had achieved a true *Weltanschauung*.

## **From psychology to education**

In 1942, while still writing his doctoral thesis, the General Staff on the Swedish army had observed Husén’s other writings and hired him as an expert to build up a system of psychological tests. He had to quickly improve his competence in psychometrics. From 1942 to 1944 he commuted between Lund and Stockholm, but in 1944, having received his Ph.D. from the University of Lund, he moved to Stockholm.

He and Gösta Ekman—later Professor of Psychology at Stockholm University—became the first two military psychologists in Sweden. Their task was to devise tests and interviews for military selection and specialization. At the same time, the task involved collecting data on other problems. From these applied research studies came publications on psychological warfare, attitude surveys among conscripts, and studies of soldiers with adjustment problems. At that time he and his co-workers also developed and standardized an individual intelligence test for adults. It was also possible to use the data from these applied studies to tackle theoretical problems. For example, he and Ekman launched studies on test reliability, scaling and validity.

He continued to write prodigiously. In 1948 he published a book reporting on the relationships between ability and social background, occupation, length of schooling and school performance. In 1950 there was another book using data from the long-term Malmö study reporting the relationships between ability test scores at 10 and 20 years of age, and estimating the influence of schooling on changes in ability over a ten-year period.

Both of these books brought to the fore the notion that, under a selective system of education, much talent existing within in society was not developed. With the onset of the democratization of education systems, was it possible for this dormant ‘reserve of talent’ to be tapped and used for the joint good of the society and the individual? One of the major questions was whether or not it was possible to identify people with a more academic bent and those with practical skills (or in more frivolous terms, if it was possible to separate the ‘academic goats’ from the ‘practical sheep’). If so, at approximately what age would it be possible to undertake this diagnosis?

None of the studies carried out by Husén and his colleagues could confirm the popular misconception that there were two kinds of relatively independent abilities or that they could be diagnosed at around the age of 10, 11 or 12. In other studies Husén examined the social consequences of differentiating the ‘bookish’ from the ‘practical’ students. It could be shown that the earlier this differentiation took place, the more social bias (higher social class being over-

represented in the higher levels of education) and the less equality of opportunity there was. These findings had an impact on policy-making in Sweden and other countries and awakened in Torsten Husén an interest in the interplay between research and policy-making, a topic to which he was to return at a later period in his life.

The results of these studies prompted the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) to organize a conference in 1961 in Sweden on 'Ability and Educational Opportunity'. The impact of this type of thinking stimulated many systems of education to question their own selective procedures. This, coupled with the political trend towards democratization, was one determining force in the onslaught of comprehensive school systems in many European countries.

## **Twin research**

One of the eternal problems of human behaviour is the extent to which it is influenced by 'nature' and 'nurture'. Husén used the military induction data for psychological research on twins. All twins among the army recruits in the period 1948-52 (about 600 per year) were categorized as identical or fraternal. The distributions and the intra-pair differences were compared between identical (mono-zygotic) and fraternal (di-zygotic) twins for ability, school achievement, height and weight, handedness and handwriting. By 1950 this was one of the largest twin studies ever carried out. It was another way of examining individual differences in behaviour in terms of environmental influences.

At that time, it was regarded as insufficient for a professor to be specialized in only developmental and differential psychology. One also needed to have demonstrated competence in the philosophical and historical aspects of education. Thus, still working on the principle of 'Never let a day go by without writing', Husén prepared three books (in the evening hours) on the history of education in Sweden and, as his subject, chose the pioneering work of the educators Fridtjov and Anders Berg. The Bergs had been particularly interested in promoting a unified compulsory school and also in conducting a spelling reform. It is therefore not entirely co-incidental that Husén published another book in 1950 presenting the results of an empirical study on the psychology of spelling.

## **The Malmö longitudinal study**

No longitudinal study is easy to conduct. The study on the whole age group of those born in 1928 in the city of Malmö is still being followed up. The Malmö study has elucidated problems of the relative effects of home and school on later careers, as well as the influence of schooling upon IQ. It has been able to examine the effects of recurrent education on the future lives of those having undergone it. Indeed, in an analysis of a subset of these data by one of his graduate students, Albert Tuijnman, the large effect of adult/recurrent education on the earnings and well-being of those in the sample was demonstrated.

The Malmö Study continued with various graduate students working on several aspects of the study, especially a follow-up of those who had been in remedial classes at school, and the relationship between failure at school and criminality. These results were presented in *Talent, Opportunity and Career* (1969).

Later follow-up studies, through multivariate modelling, were able to show the direct and indirect effects of home background, formal schooling and recurrent education on changes in earnings and social status.

Both of these were, and are, enormous enterprises. Most university professors would flinch from entering such studies. There are few who, even seeing the necessity and advantages of

undertaking these studies, would have the courage to begin them. The fact that Torsten Husén not only took them on but saw them through to the end and ensured that the results were published, together with their implications for policy changes, puts the educational world in his debt.

## **The role of research in educational reform**

In 1953 he became Professor of Educational Psychology at the University of Stockholm. These were productive years and it is at this point that another of Torsten Husén's abilities became apparent. In building up an entirely new department and a new group of co-workers, Husén recruited and held together a good team of co-workers.

In 1956 he moved to a new School of Education and became Sweden's first professor of applied educational research. In 1957 a governmental School Commission on Education began to require research on the content and methods of education in connection with drawing up the final blueprint for Sweden's nine-year comprehensive school. It was at this point that Husén's role changed from that of being a researcher to that of becoming a leader and co-ordinator of research.

Teams had to be formed. In each of five subject areas—Swedish, mathematics, physics, chemistry and social studies—analytic (including empirical) studies were undertaken on: the content being taught in grades seven to nine; the requirements of the upper-secondary and vocational schools receiving students from these grades; and an assessment of the retained knowledge and skills several years later. All of these studies had an impact on the curriculum planning of the School Commission and, thus, on the curriculum of the comprehensive school which was implemented from 1962 onwards.

One of these studies which was to have an impact on the methodology employed in the often unreported work of curriculum centres in many countries was a needs assessment survey conducted by one of Husén's graduate students, Urban Dahllöf.

It was also at this time that two other graduate students, Nils Eric Svensson and Sixten Marklund, undertook studies that were to become internationally famous. The first compared achievement in selective and comprehensive schools in the Stockholm area, while the second compared achievement in classes of different size and homogeneity. Both also influenced the recommendations of the School Commission.

At the end of the 1950s and increasingly during the 1960s there was growing governmental recognition in many countries of the advantages of using educational research results as one important basis for determining policy decisions on educational reform. Funding for educational research increased dramatically.

Husén began to examine in a critical way the utility of educational research. He became convinced that, in many cases, much research was useful for elucidating macro problems in education but was of little use in solving micro problems, such as how the teacher should optimally go about his or her tasks in the classroom. He studied the extent to which research was used (and how it was used) in Sweden, Germany, France, the United Kingdom and the United States. Two books emerged from this work: *Educational Research and Educational Change: the Case of Sweden* (with Gunnar Boalt) in 1967; and *Educational Research and Policy: How Do They Relate?* (with Maurice Kogan) in 1984.

It was in 1971 that the Swedish Parliament created a special Chair of International Education for him at Stockholm University. This, again, required creating a new team of co-workers. The International Institute of Education was slowly built up in terms of both academic faculty members and research teams. This was not an easy task.

## International leadership

In 1952 Husén had been invited by the American High Commissioner to serve as a consultant at a workshop on the role of psychological research in dealing with problems in German education. The workshop was the first major project of the German Institute for International Educational Research. It was attended by some twenty German professors of education and a dozen consultants from abroad. It was a massive attempt to map out what research might do in tackling various educational problems.

It was in 1954 that he first visited the United States and this proved to be the beginning of an intensive interaction with many outstanding American educators and psychologists—an interaction which has continued until the present. In 1959 he was a Visiting Professor at the University of Chicago, and later on he was twice (1965/66 and 1973/74) a Fellow at the Center for Advanced Studies in the Behavioral Sciences at Stanford University. He became a Foreign Associate of the United States National Academy of Education in 1967, and an Honorary Member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 1982.

At the end of the 1950s, Husén was one of a small group of researchers that met at the UNESCO Institute for Education in Hamburg. This group decided that national systems of education were worthy of investigation using empirical methods. Until that time, the outcomes of education were measured in terms of the number of pupils graduating from different levels of a school system. However, it seems that what had been learned by the students in different subjects in different systems could well vary considerably. There were certain differences between school systems in terms of age of entry to school, the structure of the system, the curriculum content, teaching methods, teacher training and the like. Would it be possible, they asked themselves, to conduct international (or inter-system) studies on a comparative basis which would yield results from which each system could learn about improving itself?

Again, this was a formidable challenge and an onerous task. It was this group that later formed itself into the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA). With his vision and intellectual curiosity, his disregard for bureaucratic hurdles and his ability to cohere groups of researchers, Husén was a self-evident candidate to be the chairman of the IEA. Despite managerial, funding and technical problems, it succeeded and its results were used as one input for policy formulation by nearly all of the education systems that had been involved.

Torsten Husén was chairman of this group from 1962 to 1978 during which time the IEA grew from twelve countries undertaking a feasibility study to the point where it had undertaken and published the results of seven large-scale studies in over twenty countries.

In the 1960s Husén was increasingly requested by ministries of education, by the International Institute for Educational Planning (IIEP) and by the UNESCO Institute for Education in Hamburg to act as an expert consultant for different aspects of education, and by the OECD to participate in their reviews of educational policy.

It was Torsten Husén who suggested the English phrase ‘recurrent education’ to Olof Palme—at that time Minister of Education and later to become Prime Minister of Sweden. This phrase was used by Palme in UNESCO and OECD meetings and eventually entered the international jargon.

In the mid-1960s he was invited by Anthony Crosland, the British Minister of Education, to come to London and discuss comprehensive schooling with him and his co-workers.

Further to this, he became interested in the attempt to predict the likely future trends of education. ‘Plan Europe 2000’ was launched by the European Cultural Foundation and it was for them that he began some work on what are referred to as ‘futurological studies’. In the aftermath of President Johnson’s ‘Williamsberg Conference’ in 1967, Husén became a Trustee of the International Council for Educational Development (ICED) and in 1971 Chairman of the Governing Board of the IIEP.

While still chairman of the IEA, Husén took on more work as a member of various national and international commissions. For instance, he was called upon to participate in Aspen, Colorado, at seminars sponsored by the Aspen Institute for Humanistic Studies for leading figures from many nations. Meanwhile, he took on the co-editorship of the ten-volume *International Encyclopedia of Education* and he still had several doctoral students.

In 1982 he became an emeritus professor, but maintained an office at his university. His committee work, his travel abroad, his expert advice to governments continued, and he was still producing books and articles at a prodigious rate. The writing and editing of the second *International Encyclopedia of Education* began in 1991.

He became the founding President of the International Academy of Education (1986-93). In 1990, together with Albert Tuijnman of the Netherlands and W.D. Halls of the United Kingdom, he wrote a report to the Academia Europaea discussing issues in European education (Husén, Tuijnman & Halls, 1992).

## The training of others

Torsten Husén had thirty-eight doctoral students, from Jon Naeslund in 1956 with a doctoral dissertation on 'Methods of Teaching Reading: a Survey and Some Experimental Contributions' to Roland Duberg in 1982 with his thesis on 'Schooling, Work Experience and Earnings: a Study of Determinants of Earnings in a Third World Corporate Setting'. Up to about 1971, the doctoral dissertation in Sweden had a very high standard (somewhat akin to the *Doctorat d'Etat* in France or the *Habilitation* in Germany) and after that it was formally equated to about the same level as doctorate in other European and American universities.

Thirty-eight doctoral dissertations is an enormous number by any standard. However, it must also be said that Torsten Husén had, for the most part, the great ability to attract good doctoral candidates so that the work load, although great, was perhaps not quite so heavy as it would seem.

Further to this, Husén played a major role in the training of international researchers through the setting up in Europe of several seminars on 'Learning and the Educational Process' and in the training of curriculum teams at the 1971 Gränna six-week seminar where 123 curriculum workers from twenty-three countries were trained.

It can be seen that Torsten Husén moved from being a researcher himself to the leadership of large research enterprises, both nationally and internationally. His work covered the psychological, sociological and historical aspects of education. He has been adept in both the philosophical and empirical approaches to scholarship in education, and his networks of educational researchers cover the whole world. The enterprises were overlapping, his knowledge eclectic, his writing prodigious.

He has been honoured by universities in Bristol, Chicago, Glasgow, Joensuu, Liège, New York, Rhode Island and Shanghai, as well as by many national educational societies.

The writing and running of large projects is time consuming and stressful. It was his wife Ingrid who was the support behind the scenes ensuring that his life was made as smooth as possible to allow him the strength and peace of mind to undertake his work. She often travelled with him, especially on longer journeys. In 1991 she died after a four-year illness.

Torsten Husén's personal and avuncular disposition, which did much to pour oil on troubled waters, should also be mentioned. His clarity of exposition and ability to pull information from related fields together to deal with specific educational problems all combine to form a great educator.

## Note

1. T. Neville Postlewaite (United Kingdom). Professor of Education, University of Hamburg. Interests include comparative and international educational research. Co-editor-in-chief with Torsten Husen of the twelve volume *International Encyclopedia of Education*, 1994. Recent publications include *Science Achievement in Twenty-three Countries* (1992) with David Wiley, and *Effective Schools in Reading* (1993) with Kenneth N. Ross.

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